

Vashon Heights Dock

Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

Originally Printed by *Vashon-Maury Island Beachcomber*, May 27, 2009 ©

Vashon Heights, at the north end of Vashon Island, was platted in 1909 as a development and the first dock was built to serve the Mosquito Fleet docks that crisscrossed Puget Sound.



The introduction of the automobile led to the construction of the ferry *Vashon Island*, the first diesel powered ferry built specifically to carry automobiles on Puget Sound. The *Vashon Island* was built at Dockton and it began serving the Des Moines-Portage route in 1916. The long drive from Des Moines to Seattle led some islanders to request service to Seattle using the downtown Marion Street Dock next to Colman Dock.

In 1919 the first runs were instituted from Vashon Heights, Harper, the small town just north of Southworth on the Kitsap Peninsula, and Seattle in a three-point operation that would ultimately set the pattern for the service we have today. In 1920-21 the first paved road on Vashon was completed from Center to Vashon Heights dock, built by the Henry J. Kaiser Company, and named the Leif Hamilton Scenic Highway after a King County Councilman. The construction of the island highway set the stage for the Vashon Heights dock to become the premier dock on Vashon.

In 1922 the Des Moines-Portage service was suspended by King County because of low use and in 1925 the Fauntleroy Dock became a fourth point on the Heights-Harper-Seattle-Fauntleroy route. The debate between using the Marion Street Dock in Seattle and the Fauntleroy Dock continued into the 1930s.

A poll of islanders in 1939 favored the Fauntleroy Dock because it meant more frequent service. 1939 was the same year a 22-day ferry strike by workers against Captain Peabody's Black Ball Line led to Vashon Vigilantes seizing the ferry *Elwha* to prevent it from leaving the island. Islanders feared that once the *Elwha* departed it would not return during the strike.

When ferry service resumed, Fauntleroy became the favored destination of ferries from the Heights, ultimately sealing the doom of the Heights-Marion Street service to downtown Seattle. This decision had significant implications for the future development of Vashon. Without ferry service directly to downtown Seattle, Vashon avoided becoming another Bainbridge Island and retained a much more rural and isolated life style than its northern neighbor.

Following another extended ferry strike in 1947, Vashon formed its own Ferry District – Ferry District # 1. The Vashon Vigilantes reappeared in 1948 to protect the newly formed Ferry District from unfair competition from Captain Peabody's Black Ball Line. They prevented the Black Ball Ferry *Illahee* from landing at Vashon Heights by using "ax handles, billiard cues, hoes and other blunt instruments. ... Unable to tie up, the vessel returned to Seattle, and the Islanders cried out in victory." (HistoryLink.org).

The Vashon Ferry District operated for four years until the State of Washington formed the Washington State Ferry System buying out Captain Peabody and incorporating the Vashon Ferry District into the new state system.



The ferries Klahanie, Kehloken, and San Mateo (the last steam ferry on Puget Sound) at Vashon Heights @ 1953 in the new Washington State Ferry System colors

A member of the Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Association rescued the original photograph from the dump. It is a hand tinted photograph from the early 1930s, looking north at the dock with the point of Blake Island to the left and the southern point of Bainbridge Island in the center. Two ferries are in the ferry slips and located to the right side of the north end of the dock is a waiting room and a small lunch counter. The Heights Grocery Store and Shell Service Station with a single hand pumped gasoline pump are located at the eastern shore end of the dock. With the end of Prohibition in 1933, the first bar on Vashon opened here. The dock has two lanes of traffic with the walkway located on the east side of the dock leading from the grocery store to the ferry slips.



Vashon Heights Dock @ 1930, Vashon Maury Island Heritage Association

The modern photograph was taken from about the same location and shows the changes that have taken place over the past 60+ years. The biggest change is the clutter that distinguishes the present dock. Direction signage, lane strips, crosswalks, and no parking stripes are all modern conveniences. The dock has changed significantly. It is 5 lanes wide, with three ferry slips, a passenger only ferry dock to the left, and a waiting room on the left hand side replacing the waiting room and lunch counter on the right hand side in the original photograph. The walkway has been moved from the right to the left hand side of the dock. The Heights Grocery Co. is now La Playa: Family Mexican Restaurant and the closest gas pump is at Vashon Town, six miles away. The south end of Bainbridge Island is still visible just under the Southworth sign.

Bruce Haulman is a Vashon Historian and Director of the Vashon History Project vashonhistory.com

Terry Donnelly is a Vashon-based landscape photographer donnelly-austin.com